

## North Norfolk Local Plan Examination

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24 May 2024<sup>1</sup>

Dear Mr Williams

### **NORTH NORFOLK LOCAL PLAN EXAMINATION**

1. Following the three weeks of hearings held between January and March, I am now able to advise as to the main soundness issues raised by the plan and to seek the views of the Council as to how they might be addressed. Firstly however can I thank the Council for the arrangements which enabled the hearings to run smoothly and effectively, particularly to Mark Ashwell, the other officers and consultants who explained the plan, to Annette Feeney for all her work behind the scenes as programme officer and to Erika Temple & Charlotte Sandon for their invaluable assistance on sitting days. Can I also thank all the other participants who contributed to the discussions to enable a full and rounded debate to take place.
2. I am also grateful for the work carried out since the hearings to update and clarify various matters, particularly for the latest standard method calculation dated 26 April 2024 (document EH009(a)(i)) and the housing trajectory dated 2 May 2024 (EH013(I)) which sets out the Council's latest position regarding housing provision. These form key inputs to this letter.
3. Having taken full account of all the background evidence and representations submitted to date together with the hearing discussions, the main concerns relating to soundness that are relevant at this stage are set out in this letter. In addition, there are a number of other soundness issues but these could be corrected relatively simply in due course by modifications to the plan and will be the subject of a further letter.
4. This letter deals in turn with the plan period, local housing need and the housing requirement, the housing provision being made in the plan and its timing, employment provision and finally the policy for gypsy, traveller and travelling showpeople's accommodation, before bringing together the implications of these findings for the next stages of the examination.

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<sup>1</sup> Not released until 19 July 2024 due to the general election.

## **Duty to Co-operate and Legal Requirements**

5. I am satisfied that the Council has met the duty to co-operate and other legal requirements relating to plan preparation.

## **Plan Period**

6. No doubt due to its lengthy preparation process, the submitted plan covers a twenty-year period from 2016 to 2036. At present, there are only 12 years of the plan period remaining, and once the further steps necessary to ensure a sound plan have been taken, it is likely to be nearer to 11 years. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) states in paragraph 22<sup>2</sup> that strategic policies should look ahead a minimum 15 years from adoption, and to be consistent with this the plan period should be extended to 31 March 2040 to allow for adoption during the next 12 months. Turning to the base date of the plan, this should correspond to the date from which the housing needs of the district are quantified. As set out in paragraph 12 below, this should be April 2024. The plan period should therefore be 2024-40. The latest housing monitoring data for permissions and projected completions reflect the position at 1 April 2023 but these are sufficiently up to date for local plan preparation purposes.

## **Local Housing Need**

7. The NPPF states in paragraph 61 that the minimum number of homes needed in the district should be determined by using the standard method set out in Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) unless exceptional circumstances justify an alternative approach. The standard method takes the 2014 based household projections as the demographic starting point to which an affordability uplift is applied and the figure potentially capped to limit any increase. However, the Council have used the lower 2016 based household projections for this exercise, which after the uplift and a 5% adjustment leads to a local housing need of 480 dwellings per annum (dpa) over the plan period 2016-2036, a total of 9,600 dwellings. The Council argues that there were significant errors in the 2014 based projections for the district that were corrected in the 2016 based projections. The latter are therefore more robust and should be used for the housing need calculation.
8. However, using the 2016 or more up to date 2018 based projection would be in direct conflict with national policy. PPG states that the 2014 projections should be used to provide stability, to ensure historic under-delivery and declining affordability are addressed, and to boost significantly the supply of homes. Where an alternative approach results in a lower housing need figure, as here, there need to be exceptional *local* circumstances that justify departing from the standard method. The PPG is also clear that whilst any alternative approach should be based on realistic assumptions, more recent

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this letter, NPPF paragraph numbers relate to the September 2023 NPPF which is the relevant version for the purposes of this examination.

household projections are not appropriate for use in what would otherwise be the standard method<sup>3</sup>.

9. The Council's objection to the 2014 based household projections is that for North Norfolk they project forward a significantly higher rate of growth than was subsequently shown to have actually happened. The projections are derived from the mid-year population estimates which suggested an increase in population of 6,000 people between 2001-11. However, the 2011 census showed the increase was actually only 3,200 people. The 'unattributable population change' (UPC) of minus 2,800 people was almost certainly due to net in-migration being over-estimated, figures for births and deaths being broadly accurate. The 2014 based projections build in this over-estimate, taking no account of UPC, whereas the error was corrected in the 2016 based estimates resulting in a significantly lower projection for the district.
10. The existence of a UPC factor in the case of the North Norfolk projection is not disputed, the issue is whether this constitutes exceptional circumstances that justify a departure from the standard method which in any event is only intended to identify a minimum figure. All local authorities were affected by UPC to some extent, and 25 outside London were subject to a higher over-estimate of population growth than North Norfolk in percentage terms. Whilst UPC discrepancies have been taken into account in a small number of planning appeals when determining housing land supply, including in North Norfolk, no examples have been provided of this issue being put forward by Councils or accepted by Inspectors when examining development plans. National policy could have been updated to adopt the 2016 or 2018 based household projections for use in the standard method but instead PPG specifically precludes their use as set out above. The issue was the subject of a technical consultation when it was decided that later projections could not be used to justify lower housing need<sup>4</sup>. Despite the Council's concerns about their accuracy, however valid, the 2014 based projections are to be used to support the objective of boosting housing supply.
11. In conclusion, the UPC discrepancy does not amount to an exceptional local circumstance that justifies a departure from the standard method in North Norfolk. The discrepancy is not such an extreme outlier nor a specific local factor, and although use of the standard method leads to a significantly higher local housing need figure, this reflects national policy. Furthermore, there is no obvious reason why housing provision in the district should be unnecessarily restricted.

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<sup>3</sup> PPG paragraphs 2a-005-20190220 and 2a-015-20190220

<sup>4</sup> Technical consultation on updates to national planning policy and guidance, October 2018, and Government response to the technical consultation, February 2019.

12. Having concluded that the standard method should be followed instead of the Council’s bespoke method, the latest available information should be used to derive the most up to date housing need figure for the district. With the latest affordability ratio published in March, it is possible to derive the local housing need figure as follows:

2014 based household projection for 2024-34	391 dpa
Latest affordability ratio 10.80 so uplift	1.425
Local Housing Need 2024-34	557 dpa <sup>5</sup>
Local Housing Need 2024-40 (16 years)	8,900 dwellings

13. The local housing need methodology takes account of any previous over or under supply, so there is no shortfall or surplus arising pre 2024 to add to this figure.

### **Housing Requirement**

14. The housing requirement to be delivered by the plan should be the same as the local housing need figure as there is no justification to increase the figure to accommodate an employment led approach or to meet the unmet needs of a neighbouring authority, nor to reduce the figure as a result of significant environmental or other constraints that mean the need cannot reasonably be met within the district.

### **Five Year Housing Land Requirement**

15. Paragraph 68 of the NPPF requires the plan to identify a supply of specific, deliverable sites for the first five years. With adoption likely by April 2025, the plan should identify a suitable supply for the period 2025-2030. With a 5% buffer<sup>6</sup>, this should be at least  $557 \times 5 + 5\% = 2,925$  dwellings, plus any shortfall from 2024/25.

### **Spatial Strategy and Site Selection**

16. The spatial strategy of the plan (Policy SS1) is based on a settlement hierarchy with five tiers – Large Growth Towns (Cromer, North Walsham and Fakenham), five Small Growth Towns, four Large Growth Villages, 22 Small Growth Villages and Countryside. For sustainability and accessibility reasons the plan aims to direct the majority of growth towards the larger towns with successively lower levels of growth in the case of the lower tiers with fewer services and facilities. This is a justified approach. The methodology for arriving at the hierarchy is set out in Background Paper 2 (C2) and the site selection methodology in Background Paper 6 (C6); neither were subject to serious dispute at the hearings. The apportionment of growth to the towns and large growth villages is not however prescriptive and site allocations are made on a detailed assessment of promoted sites for their availability and suitability. The results of this exercise are set out in the site assessment

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<sup>5</sup> The figure is uncapped as it is below 560 dpa

<sup>6</sup> NPPF Paragraph 74

booklets for each individual settlement (D1-D12) and the conclusions are supported by the evidence unless stated otherwise below.

## **Overall Housing Provision in the Plan**

17. During the plan period, housing would be provided in the following ways which are discussed in turn:
  - (i) allocations being made in the plan
  - (ii) the small growth village policy
  - (iii) large and small sites with planning permission as at April 2023
  - (iv) windfall sites that arise during the plan period

### **(i) Allocations being made in the plan**

18. The plan proposes a series of allocations which were selected using the process described above. With the exceptions set out below, the allocations are justified by the evidence and suitable for inclusion in the plan. In relation to the timing of development on these sites, the Council's latest trajectory (EH013(I)) acknowledges slippage in some cases from that expected in the submission plan. However, the trajectory still appears unduly optimistic in the case of the two large allocations at North Walsham and Fakenham and this has significant implications for housing delivery in the plan period. My conclusions in this respect are also explained below.

### **North Walsham**

19. North Walsham is a large growth town without significant environmental or landscape constraints and has been correctly identified as suitable for large scale development in the plan. There are however a number of highway concerns affecting key junctions and some residential roads caused by the nature of the road network, three low railway bridges and the location of the main industrial area to the north of the town. Without improvement, major development would exacerbate these issues and the strategy to concentrate growth to the west of the town in conjunction with a new western link road (WLR) is a well evidenced response.
20. The plan as submitted proposes a WLR linking Norwich Road, Cromer Road and the industrial estate in conjunction with the allocation of Site NW62/A (Land West of North Walsham) for mixed use including 2,000 dwellings<sup>7</sup>. However, the transport assessment dated November 2023 (EX017/EX018) concludes that a northern extension of the WLR over the railway line to the industrial estate is not necessary to mitigate the traffic impacts of the development. Such an extension would in any event involve major road widening/new construction and potentially a new railway bridge, with serious implications for scheme viability. In addition, the extension would encourage heavy goods vehicles (HGV) from the industrial estate to use the Norwich Road (B1150), increasing HGV flows on a sub-optimal route through the villages of Coltishall and Horstead.

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<sup>7</sup> 1,800 dwellings and elderly accommodation totalling 200 dwelling equivalents.

21. The Council therefore seek a modification to the plan to reduce the WLR to a link between Norwich Road and Cromer Road, with any northern extension a matter for the future. Whilst a shorter WLR would reduce its benefit to the town, with many HGV movements to and from the industrial estate still needing to pass through the town centre and along the residential Aylsham Road, the extension is effectively undeliverable at this time.
22. With this modification the potential access arrangements for a small part of the allocation to the north of the railway line are unclear. Intended to facilitate the WLR extension to the industrial estate, without the extension this area would comprise an isolated area of housing development, poorly related to the town and an unjustified intrusion into the countryside. This part of the allocation should therefore be deleted from the plan. This would not significantly affect the 2,000 dwelling capacity of the allocation.
23. The 2.4 ha employment allocation Land East of Bradfield Road (NW52) is also intended to facilitate a link from the industrial estate to the WLR and without it would undesirably increase HGV movements through the town. The site is not essential for employment purposes in the plan period as explained in paragraphs 50-53 below and would encroach into the countryside to the north-west of the town. The site should therefore be deleted from the plan pending consideration of any northern extension of the WLR in the future.
24. The timing of the development west of the town is not clear at this stage. Although much preparatory work has been done, the overall scheme is complex, with two roundabouts needed to gain access to the initial phases, off-site highway improvements, some before construction can commence in earnest, and much legal and technical work required. The consortium's evidence on timing has been inconsistent, indicating the situation is still fluid, and only a 'high level' Gantt chart with little detail has been produced. It is intended to submit an outline planning application in Summer 2024 with approval anticipated by the end of 2025, after which reserved matters, technical approvals and early site works will be required before house construction can commence. The viability assessment allows two years for these processes, to the end of 2027, and then 9 months until the first house completions in 2028/29. The plan as submitted assumed completions would commence in 2026/27 whilst the latest schedule indicates slippage of a year to 2027/28. However, the current level of uncertainty and clear scope for delay suggests 2028/29 for the first completions is more likely, slippage of two years from the submitted plan. Indeed, this is still optimistic in the light of the findings of the Lichfields Start to Finish research.
25. In terms of anticipated completion rates, the development will overlap with the build out of Site NW01/B (Land at Norwich Road & Nursery Drive), a more straightforward site with hybrid planning permission due to be issued shortly. House completions and a care home on this site from 2026/27 to 2033/34 are likely to compete with those coming forward on NW62/A. The completion rate provided at the hearing of an average of 100 dpa based on two outlets, with periodic tranches of elderly accommodation, as originally put forward in the submitted plan, is thus more realistic than the overly

optimistic and widely fluctuating profile of completions in the latest schedule. The plan should therefore assume the trajectory in the submitted plan but delayed by two years. The upshot of this is the provision of about 1,270 dwellings on the site during the plan period instead of the 1,596 shown on the Council's latest schedule, a reduction of 326.

## **Fakenham**

26. Significant development was proposed for Fakenham, another large growth town, when 85 ha of primarily agricultural land north of Rudham Stile Lane was allocated in the Council's Site Allocations DPD adopted in 2011. Progress in delivering the main site however has been slow, with a development brief approved in 2015 and outline planning permission for up to 950 dwellings on the area east of Water Moor Lane only granted in 2021 following a four-year determination period. Several reserved matters still remain to be resolved, the means to address the nutrient neutrality issue that emerged in 2022 are not yet fully identified, and no developer is currently in place. As a result, the latest trajectory assumes the scheme will start to deliver completions in 2027/28, three years later than the 2024/25 date in the plan as submitted. Completions are projected to rise to an average of 100 pa from two outlets. Whilst many steps still need to be taken, this should be achievable.
27. Whilst the site east of Water Moor Lane is thus a commitment, that to the west has no planning permission in place and consequently is reallocated in the local plan as Site F01/B (Land North of Rudham Stile Lane) for about 627 dwellings<sup>8</sup>. The site is in effect a continuation of that to the east and for the most part is in the hands of the same institutional landowner. The strategy for development of the allocation forms part of that drawn up for the wider site and there is little doubt that the necessary applications will be made in due course to enable the full site to be built out. However, the delays so far will have a knock-on effect on the timing of completions.
28. Whilst there may be some overlap between the development of the land east and west of Water Moor Lane the sites would be in direct competition. The plan as submitted assumed that building on the land to the west would pick up as that to the east winds down, the most likely scenario. However, the Council's latest trajectory for delivery of the site is the same as that in the submitted plan, with no allowance for slippage. There is no evidence for this, and delivery in parallel of up to 200 or so dwellings a year is unlikely. A more realistic assumption is that building on the land to the west would be delayed by three years from the date assumed in the submitted plan, like that to the east. Completions from both sites together would then peak at a maximum of 150 in a single year. This would mean Site F01/B starting delivery in 2035/36 with the profile then as in the submitted plan. The upshot of this is the provision of about 327 dwellings on the site during the plan period (plus 950 on the site to the east) instead of the 627 shown on the Council's schedule, a reduction of 300.

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<sup>8</sup> 560 dwellings and elderly accommodation totalling 67 dwelling equivalents.

## **Cromer**

29. The plan as submitted allocates three sites in Cromer, the third large growth town. Two lie in the Norfolk Coast National Landscape (formerly Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty), the Former Golf Practice Ground, Overstrand Road (C16) for 150 dwellings and Land West of Pine Tree Farm (C22/2) for 400 dwellings plus an element of elderly accommodation in each case. Whilst major developments in relation to Cromer the requirement for growth to meet local housing need and the town's position in the settlement hierarchy constitute exceptional circumstances to justify the developments in the public interest. However, a further site outside the National Landscape, Land at Runton Road/Clifton Park was proposed as an allocation for 90 dwellings in the 2019 draft plan but was not carried forward into the submitted plan. The merits of this site should clearly be reconsidered as one of the options under paragraph 48(i) below. Site CO7/2 (Land at Cromer High Station) has been allocated since 2011 without development coming forward and in the circumstances none should be assumed in this plan period.

## **Wells**

30. Wells lies within the Norfolk Coast National Landscape, but as a small growth town with particularly high house prices and second/holiday home ownership, there are exceptional circumstances that justify further housing development in the public interest where suitable sites are available. The submitted plan allocates two sites, with Site W01/1 (Land South of Ashburton Close) forming a natural extension to the Home Piece Road estate, a recent scheme which demonstrates how the town can acceptably expand away from the front.
31. However, the second allocation, Site W07/1 (Land adjacent Holkham Road) lies on the coastal side of the ridge which extends to the west of the town. The site comprises the top section of a grassed field which rises from the B1105 Holkham Road at about sea level up to the 20 m contour and the rear gardens of the houses fronting Mill Road on the ridge. The site enjoys wide views to the north over the Wells salt marshes, harbour, Holkham Meals and reclaimed farmland as far as Lady Ann's Drive, but the corollary of this exposed position is the impact that housing development on the site would have on this sensitive and nationally defined heritage coast landscape.
32. The site is well screened from Holkham Road by the roadside hedgerow but is clearly seen in intermittent long-distance views from the North Norfolk Coast Path from the café at the end of Lady Ann's Drive to Wells beach car park, and most seriously in ever closer views when approaching the town along the top of the Beach Road embankment, a heavily used route which also forms part of the long distance path. The scheme would also be intrusive when seen from the Wells Town football ground and overflow car park area. Whilst the houses along Mill Road would lie behind the development on the skyline, the trees within and at the back of their long rear gardens do much to mitigate their impact. By contrast, a new development of 50 dwellings along



the top of the field, however well designed and landscaped on its northern edge, would appear raw and intrusive in the landscape for many years.

33. The site itself lies just within the Rolling Open Farmland landscape character type (LCT)<sup>9</sup> but is heavily influenced by its position overlooking the Drained Coastal Marshes and Open Coastal Marshes LCTs. Contrary to the landscape guidance for these LCTs the proposed allocation would consolidate a form of linear sprawl along the undeveloped coast, intrude into views inland from the coastal marshes, detracting from their naturalistic nature and reducing their relative tranquillity and remoteness, including at night when additional light sources on the ridge would erode the dark night sky.
34. The proposed access to the site from Mill Road, cutting across an attractive grass paddock in front of the Mill Farm buildings and adjacent to Nos 106-110, would also be an unduly intrusive feature. It would be poorly related to the housing estate behind, an odd entrance to the scheme, both spoiling the existing paddock and urbanising the A149 western approach to the town.
35. For these reasons the evidence base supporting the allocation is flawed. In particular, the landscape impact assessment under the site selection methodology should be red – the landscape impact on a sensitive landscape cannot be mitigated – rather than amber – mitigation would be possible. There is no clear physical boundary on the ground to distinguish this site from the larger site W07 of which it forms part, and which has rightly been assessed as unsuitable for development. The allocation of Site W07/1 is not justified and thus it should be deleted from the plan.

### **Sheringham**

36. Full planning permission has been granted and construction is well underway on Site SH07 (Former allotments, Weybourne Road, adjacent to The Reef). The allocation should now be deleted from the plan.

### **Hoveton**

37. In the case of Site HV01/B (Land East of Tunstead Road), the Council are proposing that the allocation as submitted should be extended to the north with the site capacity increased from 120 to 150 dwellings plus elderly accommodation. Although there was some discussion about the larger site at the hearings, the extension proposal has not been subject to full public consultation, and this should be carried out as part of the process outlined in paragraph 58 below.

### **Ludham**

38. Site LUD06/A (Land at Eastern End of Grange Road) has been allocated since 2011 with no development coming forward. The access is constrained by the presence of preserved trees with no evidence this can be overcome. The allocation should therefore be deleted from the plan.

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<sup>9</sup> As defined by the North Norfolk Landscape Character Assessment SPD January 2021

## **(ii) The Small Growth Villages Policy**

39. The strategy in Policy SS1 and set out in Appendix 4 relating to Small Growth Villages is not justified or effective as submitted. Whilst it is potentially a sound approach to specify an acceptable percentage growth figure for such settlements rather than to allocate sites in the plan, the approach is inherently uncertain and brings significant disadvantages both for the communities concerned and other interested parties. However, there are precedents for such an approach (eg Breckland Local Plan Policy HOU04) and should the Council wish to pursue it, some modifications would be required.
40. In particular, these are:
- the stipulation that no further permissions will be granted after the village 'allowance' is reached is arbitrary and not justified. The policy should be reworded to allow 'not significantly more than' a 6% increase in dwellings.
  - there is no justification for an arbitrary quantitative limit on new dwelling provision within the defined settlement boundaries at any time.
  - criterion (e) should be deleted as there is no justification for small sites to incorporate substantial community benefits. Any requirements to make the development acceptable can be secured under Policy HC4.
  - criterion (f) is not justified as currently worded and would render the policy ineffective by causing uncertainty and acting to deter schemes coming forward<sup>10</sup>. The criterion could however be reworded to state that suitable schemes proposed in partnership with a registered social landlord that would deliver affordable housing in excess of the normal Policy HOU2 requirement will receive particularly favourable consideration.
  - Horning should be treated as a 'Constrained Small Growth Village' and the indicative housing allowance (31 in the revised list in document A5.11) set at 0 as there is no realistic prospect of the local water recycling centre meeting the required environmental standards in the foreseeable future. This is due to unstable ground conditions and a permanently high water table leading to groundwater infiltration of the sewerage network for which no solutions have yet been identified.
41. The total provision from this source over the plan period should therefore be reduced from 453 to 422 dwellings starting in 2027/28 as the policy only commences on adoption of the plan. However, there is considerable scope for widening the policy as explained in paragraph 48 below.

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<sup>10</sup> Breckland Local Plan Policy HOU04 does not contain such a criterion.

**(iii) Large and Small Sites with Planning Permission as at April 2023**

42. The Council's monitoring of sites with planning permission as at April 2023 indicates 1,646 dwellings are likely to come forward during the plan period 2024-40 on large sites of over 10 dwellings (950 of these on the site north of Rudham Stile Lane at Fakenham) and 441 on small sites. These figures allow for a non-implementation rate.

**(iv) Windfall sites that arise during the plan period**

43. The submitted plan was based on April 2021 monitoring data and assumed that previously unidentified windfall sites would start to contribute housing completions just one year later, in 2022/23. However, the latest trajectory, with planning permissions recorded as at April 2023, assumes a two-year gap with windfall sites making a contribution from 2025/26. This is a reasonable assumption. The likely contribution from this source can only ever be an estimate, with the submitted plan assuming 135 dpa, a cautious figure well below the historic average of 295 dpa which came forward from windfall sites during the period 2016-23. It should be noted that under Policy SS1 windfall sites in 22 small growth villages will now count towards a separate total.

44. In the letter dated 25 March 2024 (EH013(k)) the Council propose that the windfall allowance for the period 2029/30 to 2039/40 should be increased to 180 dpa, an additional contribution of 495 dwellings over the plan period. This is considered in paragraph 47 below.

**Overall Housing Provision in relation to the Requirement**

45. With the adjustments set out above, the overall conclusion is that the plan would provide about 8,212 dwellings over the plan period 2024-40 towards the overall requirement of 8,900, a shortfall of about 700 dwellings. In relation to housing land supply for the five-year period 2025-30, the plan would provide about 2,893 dwellings compared to a requirement of 2,925 dwellings. When the shortfall from 2024/25 is added, this would amount to a significant undersupply and there would be no allowance for any unforeseen contingencies.

**Housing Provision – Way Forward**

46. Unfortunately, for the reasons set out above, the plan does not at present provide sufficient housing to meet the housing needs of the district over the full plan period, with a projected shortfall in both the early and later years. There is an initial five-year housing land supply shortfall. Furthermore, should the planned allocations or other sites not come forward as currently anticipated, which is quite possible, the shortfall in the early years would increase. A standard plan review after five years would not address this early-years issue, although it could bring forward further land later in the plan period if necessary. I am not therefore able to conclude at present that the plan is positively prepared, meeting the objectively assessed needs of the district, one of the tests of soundness in paragraph 35 of the NPPF.

47. The shortfall is about 700 dwellings, but this allows no contingency for unforeseen events such as further slippage of the large allocations, the non-implementation of smaller allocations, the small growth villages policy not working as intended or insufficient windfall sites coming forward. The need for schemes to deliver nutrient neutrality in much of the district, with solutions still uncertain at the time of writing, is a factor here. Therefore, as matters currently stand, the provision made by the submitted plan should be increased by at least 1,000 dwellings to allow some flexibility. I do however agree that in North Norfolk with its numerous settlements and extensive countryside there is enough scope for windfall sites to come forward that the Council's revised estimate of an additional 495 dwellings from this source over the plan period can go some way to filling the gap.
48. However, excessive reliance on unspecified windfall sites adds uncertainty to the plan and more concrete steps need to be taken to bring forward more housing in the plan period, particularly in the early years. The options available include, and there may be others:
- (i) Additional or extended allocations in large and small growth towns and large growth villages in accordance with the spatial strategy and settlement hierarchy of the plan. Whilst further sites in Fakenham and North Walsham should not be ruled out, they may divert some demand from the large-scale developments already proposed for these towns.
  - (ii) Increasing the expansion of small growth villages above 6%.
  - (iii) Expansion of the list of small growth villages to include those with a single key service or (say) three secondary/desirable services. As document EX034(a) demonstrates, there are numerous villages with a primary school, convenience shop or other services that are sufficiently nucleated in form to allow for a coherent settlement boundary which are not currently included.
  - (iv) Inclusion of a new policy allowing sensitive infilling and rounding off in small villages and hamlets without a settlement boundary (Breckland Local Plan Policy HOU05 is an example in an area with a similarly dispersed settlement pattern). Alternatively, settlement boundaries could be defined but without any provision for development beyond the boundary.
  - (v) If the allocation in the Wells Neighbourhood Plan at Two Furlongs Hill is included in the finalised plan the proposed 45 dwellings could be included in the future supply.
49. Policy support for (ii) – (iv) above is provided by paragraph 79 of the NPPF which advises that housing should be located to enhance or maintain the vitality of rural communities, opportunities should be identified for villages to grow and thrive, especially where this will support local services, and where there are groups of smaller settlements, development in one village may support services in a village nearby. As submitted the plan's policies for smaller villages, even some with key services, are unusually restrictive.

## Employment Land

50. Whilst much of the employment in the district lies in other sectors, with jobs in food/accommodation, agriculture and retail above the regional average, it is important to provide and protect an adequate supply of employment land for industrial and other businesses to develop and thrive. To secure this, Policy E1 in the submitted plan seeks to allocate 200 ha of existing, 54 ha of undeveloped and 16 ha of new employment land in the various settlements across the district, 271 ha in all<sup>11</sup>. There is much redevelopment of existing employment land as the needs of individual businesses change, but the scope for 70 ha of new development is more than sufficient to accommodate the most optimistic projection for a take up of 40 ha during the submitted plan period 2016-36. Other projections indicate that the realistic requirement is in fact much less, perhaps as low as 6.5 ha.
51. Unfortunately, the owner of the proposed 6 ha employment allocation at Heath Farm, Holt (Site H27/1) does not now wish to pursue development, and as explained in paragraph 23, the 2.4 ha allocation east of Bradfield Road, North Walsham (Site NW52) should also be deleted from the plan. However, even with 8.4 ha less provision for new development and a plan period extended by four years to 2040, there would still be sufficient land being made available to meet the likely need.
52. This is particularly the case as it is proposed to amend Policy E3 to allow scope for employment development outside designated areas if no suitable land is available within them. In addition, Policy E3 could include support for alternative proposals to come forward in Holt if suitable sites become available, as the withdrawal of the allocation results in a lack of employment land options in the town.
53. Overall therefore, there are no significant soundness issues in relation to the provision of employment land in the plan.

## Gypsy, traveller and travelling showpeople's accommodation

54. Policy HOU5 seeks to meet the accommodation needs of gypsies, travellers and travelling showpeople in the district with a criteria-based policy on the basis that the latest needs assessment demonstrates that the requirement for further sites is likely to be very small. However, that assessment<sup>12</sup> is based on seven-year old fieldwork with its most accurate projections of need relating to the five-year period 2017-22.
55. With the passage of time the evidence base of the plan is not now sufficiently robust to assess future need in order to set pitch/plot targets in accordance with paragraph 9 of the Planning Policy for Traveller Sites<sup>13</sup>, nor, if necessary, to identify a supply of sites in accordance with paragraphs 10-11. The

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<sup>11</sup> Corrected figures, the new allocation at Stalham is 1 ha

<sup>12</sup> Norfolk Caravans and Houseboats Accommodation Needs Assessment including for Gypsies, Travellers and Travelling Show People, RRR Consultancy Ltd, October 2017

<sup>13</sup> December 2023 version

existing assessment also pre-dates the change in the definition of gypsies, travellers and travelling showpeople made in December 2023.

56. In order to ensure the plan is sound, the Council should therefore commission an updated study to assess need in accordance with latest best practice and then to consider what steps might need to be taken to address its findings in the plan, including if necessary proposing allocations or amending the criteria in Policy HOU5.

## **Conclusion**

57. Whilst the Council may be disappointed that it is not possible to move directly to the main modifications stage, there is a clear way forward for the plan if the shortfall in housing provision is addressed together with any implications of an up to date accommodation assessment for gypsies, travellers and travelling showpeople.
58. The Council will no doubt wish to take some time to consider how to address the housing provision issue. Please keep me informed of progress. In due course I should be advised of the suggested changes to the submitted plan to ensure they have the potential to overcome the soundness issue, after which the Council should carry out a six-week public consultation exercise on those changes. Assuming the Council wish to proceed in the light of the response, any representations made would be treated as representations on the local plan and would be considered as part of any future resumed hearings that may be necessary.
59. In due course I would be grateful for a formal response to this letter setting out how the Council wish to proceed and the anticipated timetable for the work that is necessary.
60. This letter should be placed on the examination website for information. I will ask the programme officer to inform hearing participants when it is published but I am not inviting or accepting submissions from other parties at this stage.

*David Reed*

INSPECTOR